Nonmetro Migration Drops in the West and Among College Graduates

The nonmetro population continued to increase from net migration but at a much lower rate than in previous years. After leading other regions in the first half of the 1990's, the nonmetro West experienced a substantial drop in net migration during 1996-99. Metro-to-nonmetro migration among college graduates also dropped substantially, though not to the level of the rural brain drain of earlier decades. Net migration rates were higher for low-wage workers despite lower rates of in- and outmigration combined.

During the 2-year period ending March 1999, 3.9 million people moved to nonmetro areas from metro locations, while 3.3 million moved out. The average annual gain of 281,000 people per year reflects continuing strength in the rural economy and in people's preferences for small-town living. The gain, however, is significantly lower than the 415,000 annual gain reported last year (*RCaT*, Vol. 9, No. 2) for the 2-year period ending March 1997. Annual population growth from net migration, including immigration from abroad, increased steadily during the early and mid-1990's, but dropped to half of 1 percent during 1997-99, according to the latest data from the Current Population Survey (see box, "About the Data").

Much of the recent decline in nonmetro net migration occurred among college graduates, who moved out in numbers almost equal to those moving in for the first time since the early 1990's. Regional changes accompanied the drop in migration among the well-educated, who contributed disproportionately to the high population growth in the West during the early 1990's. The nonmetro South and Midwest have become more popular migration destinations. Although high-income migrants had substantially higher rates of in- and outmigration, the two streams were close to equal in size, so that nonmetro areas gained more population among low-wage workers. Hispanics also had high nonmetro migration gains.

Net Migration Losses Were Among Labor Force Entrants and Retirees

Over 14 percent of the nonmetro population changed homes each year in a variety of moves, ranging from strictly local to cross-country and even international relocations (table 1). Over half were within-county moves, many of which coincided with milestone life events, such as entering the labor market, getting married, and having children. Others moved between nonmetro counties, typically also a local move but often linked with a change in employment or educational pursuits. These moves begin and end in nonmetro

About the Data

These migration statistics are from the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor. CPS derives estimates based on a national sample of about 60,000 households that are representative of the U.S. civilian, noninstitutional population. The sample is large enough to provide information on the demographic and economic characteristics of the nonmetro population at the national and regional level, but not generally at State or local levels. The March CPS contains a supplemental question asking respondents where they were living a year prior to the survey. Metro and nonmetro migration statistics are derived by comparing past to current residence.

This article uses 4 years of March CPS data, 1996-99, the only years with consistent, up-to-date metro and nonmetro residence classifications available. Prior to 1996, the CPS used a metro-nonmetro definition based on 1980 rather than 1990 census data. In this article, data are reported separately for each year for broad national and regional statistics and large subpopulations (figs. 1-2). For smaller groups (figs. 3-5), the latest two annual surveys were combined, providing data on migration during 1997-99, because combining surveys increases the reliability of the migration estimates.

Net migration is the small difference between two much larger migration streams—inmigration and outmigration—that are known to fluctuate year to year. In addition, estimates from the CPS can fluctuate even when actual net migration is stable. Therefore, readers should interpret nonmetro migration statistics with caution.

Table 1

Average annual percentage of nonmetro residents who moved, by age, 1997-99

Nonmetro net migration loss during the early-adult years(18-24) and among retirees (65+) is offset by migration gains during early-career and family-formation ages (25-29)

Mobility/migration status	Age group						
	1-17	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-64	65+	All ages
	Percent						
Total mobility of nonmetro residents[1]	17.2	29.7	26.1	15.9	8.7	3.6	14.4
Moved within same county	10.6	17.4	14.9	9.2	4.5	2.2	8.4
Moved between nonmetro counties	2.4	5.2	3.5	2.4	1.5	.6	2.2
Moved from metro to nonmetro	4.0	6.6	7.2	4.2	2.6	.8	3.6
Moved from abroad	.2	.6	.5	.1	.2	0	.2
Moved from nonmetro to metro	3.1	8.2	6.2	3.6	2.1	1.0	3.3
Net migration from metro to nonmetro	.9	-1.6	1.0	.6	.5	-.2	.3

[1]Total mobility is the percentage of current residents who moved during the previous year, whether within the same county, between nonmetro counties, or in from a metro area or abroad. Movement out of nonmetro areas is also expressed here as a percentage of current residents in order to calculate a consistent net migration rate.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the March 1997 and March 1998 Current Population Surveys.

areas and therefore do not affect overall nonmetro population numbers, but they contribute greatly to changing settlement patterns, which can shape local economic growth and contribute to fiscal problems.

Change to the nonmetro population came from those who moved each year between metro and nonmetro counties. Close to 2 million people moved into nonmetro areas each year during 1997-99, while the number of outmigrants jumped from roughly 1.6 to 1.8 million. Among those moving in, about 100,000 were immigrants, moving directly to nonmetro from foreign countries. New immigrants are a relatively small group in any given year, representing just 0.2 percent of the nonmetro population. They are regionally concentrated, however, in a few States such as Florida, Texas, and Arizona, and in specific counties in other States, and, thus, have significantly altered their local economies. (The Current Population Survey does not provide an estimate of annual emigration to countries outside the United States.)

Mobility is concentrated among young adults, who often require several moves to reach educational goals and gain work experience. Nearly 30 percent of 18-24 year olds living in nonmetro areas moved in the previous year, including 6.6 percent moving in from metro areas. But a larger number moved away, resulting in a 1.6-percent population loss overall for this age group. Leaving rural areas after high school for colleges and jobs in the big city is a well-established pattern, but a large proportion return home after a few years. Although not measurable with the data used here, return migration no doubt contributes to the large nonmetro net migration gains among 25-29 year olds; similarly high gains among children ages 1-17 indicate that a large share of younger working-age adults moving to nonmetro areas have already started families. Compared with the 31-percent mobility rate among 18-24 year olds, less than 4 percent of retirees moved in a given year during 1997-99. Like those entering the labor force, slightly more of them moved out of nonmetro areas, contributing to a marked decrease in overall population growth among nonmetro retirees during the 1990's.

Recent Slowdown in Nonmetro Migration Centered in the West

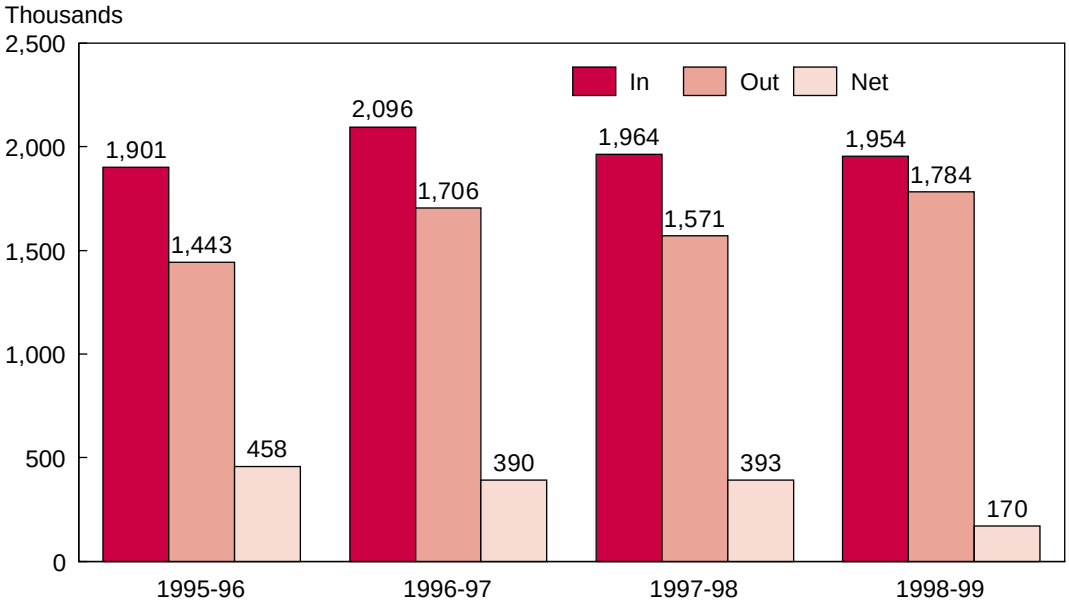
New metro and nonmetro classifications based on 1990 data were fully incorporated into the Current Population Survey in 1996, so that 4 years of consistent data showing the

flows into and out of nonmetro areas are now available. The trends indicate a slowdown in nonmetro migration gains from 458,000 in 1995-96 to 170,000 in 1998-99 (fig. 1). Both the number of inmigrants and outmigrants increased over the 3-year period, but the increase was higher among outmigrants, reflecting a booming metro economy with increasing employment opportunities for labor force entrants.

Unlike the 1980's when the rural economy faced a major recession with setbacks in agriculture and mining, net migration continued to be positive through 1999. This growth both reflects and enhances the economic advantages found in many rural locations that attract both people and jobs. These advantages were particularly attractive during the early 1990's when metro areas were harder hit and slower to recover from the economic recession. As large cities continue to prosper, we may expect continued increases in outmigration from nonmetro areas; however, prosperity also tends to increase nonmetro inmigration, as more people have the discretionary income to act on preferences for a rural lifestyle.

The downturn in metro economies and the preference for high-amenity rural settings spurred growth to record levels in the nonmetro West through the mid-1990's. As late as 1995-96, the West led other regions in net migration gains by a large margin (fig. 2). Migration dropped dramatically in the following 3 years, at a time when metro areas throughout the West, especially in southern California (a major point of origin for migrants to other western States), were several years into a strong economic recovery. The emergence of net outmigration from the nonmetro West during 1997-99 is surprising given the continuing allure of the West's natural amenities. Other data (see "Nonmetro Population Growth Rate Recedes in a Time of Unprecedented National Prosperity," p. 27) indicate that the region is still receiving a small though rapidly diminishing surplus of migrants. The small population base in the nonmetro West, compared with other regions, lowers the precision of the population estimates derived from the Current Population Survey. We can safely say that the nonmetro population boom that drew much media attention, and prompted the description of a "new economy" emerging in the nonmetro West, has ended for now.

Figure 1
Nonmetro in-, out-, and net migration, 1995-99
Nonmetro outmigration rose faster than inmigration during 1995-99, lowering net migration

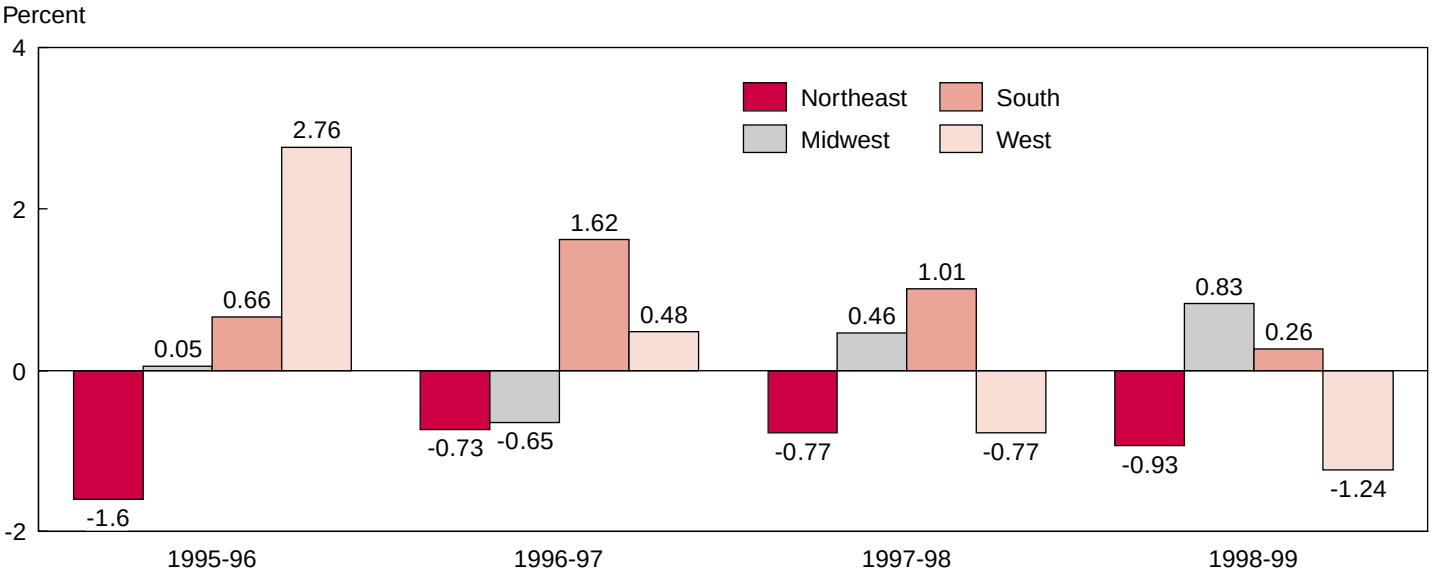


Source: Calculated by ERS using March 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 2

Nonmetro net migration by region, 1995-99

Consistent net migration gains in the South mirrored losses in the Northeast; migration to the nonmetro West declined



Source: Calculated by ERS using March 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 Current Population Surveys.

Net migration continued to rise in the South and Midwest during 1997-99, but consistently declined in the Northeast. The mirror image of positive migration in the South and negative in the Northeast partly reflects the continued attractiveness of sunbelt locations, a defining feature of U.S. migration since the 1950's.

Net Inmigration of College Graduates Slows

One of the striking features of the rural recovery of the 1990's was the high educational composition of inmigrants relative to outmigrants. In 1992, more college-educated people migrated into than out of nonmetro areas, ending a brain drain that characterized migration patterns in the 1980's and contributed to a large rural-urban education gap (see "Rural-Urban Migration Patterns Shift," *RCaT*, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 11). The trend deepened through 1995-96, when net inmigration of college graduates reached 1.4 percent, twice the rate for high school graduates. Since then, outmigration among the college educated declined, while high rates of inmigration continued among those with less education (fig. 3). Net migration rates are now highest among people without a high school degree, reflecting a narrower range of options available to them in technology-driven urban job markets and, perhaps, the higher availability of low-skill work in nonmetro areas.

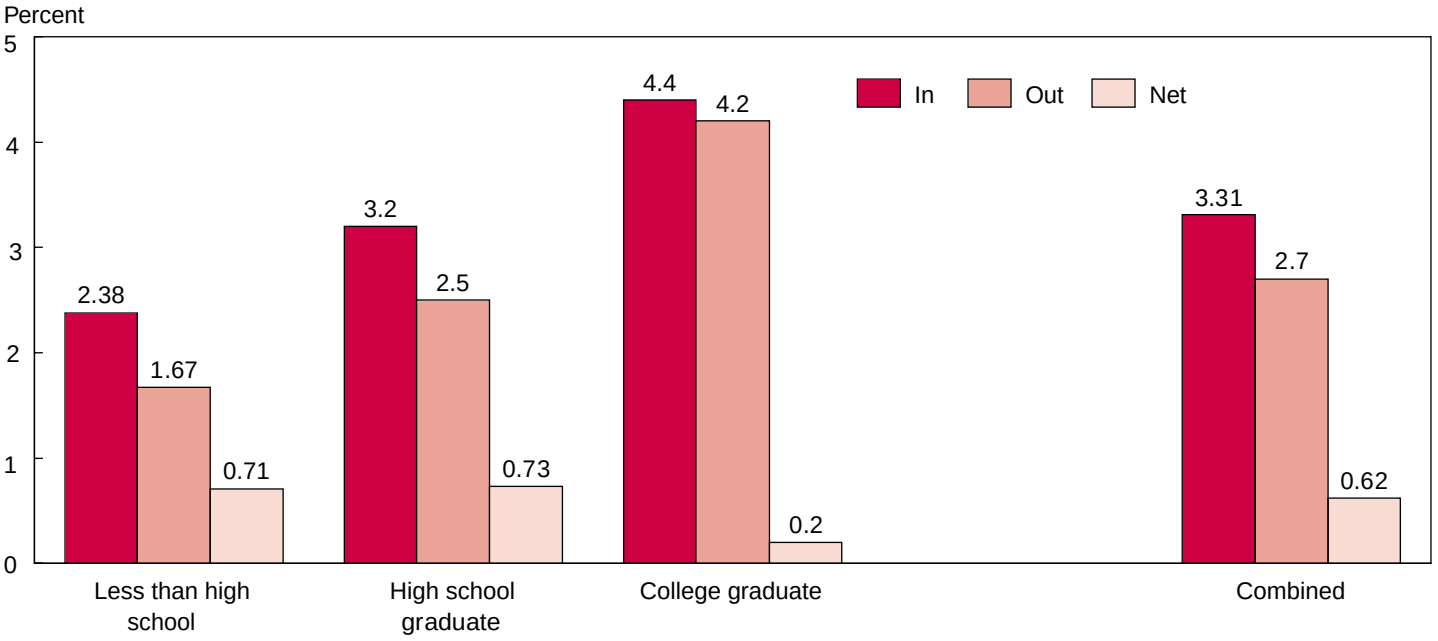
Net migration among the college educated dropped to near zero during 1997-99, but not below as it was during the 1980's, when net outmigration among this group reached 2 percent a year. Advances in transportation and telecommunications strengthened the linkages between rural and urban economies during the 1990's, making it easier for internet-based entrepreneurs and other high-tech firms to conduct business far from the urban customers they mostly serve. These and other economic restructuring trends, especially in rural manufacturing, have increased rural opportunities for the well educated and diminished the chances that the rural brain drain will resume.

Although migration is notoriously difficult to predict, it would not be surprising to see migration to the nonmetro West and among the college educated rebound in the coming years. There is considerable overlap in the recent diminished growth in the nonmetro West and among those with college degrees, who can better afford high-amenity destina-

Figure 3

Average annual migration rates to nonmetro areas, by education, 1997-99

Nonmetro college graduates were highly mobile, but population gains were low



Source: Calculated by ERS using March 1998 and 1999 Current Population Surveys.

tions found in the West than those with fewer educational credentials. Even migrants filling relatively low-skill jobs, such as in the booming retail sector, had much higher educational levels in the nonmetro West than elsewhere. According to a number of surveys, many migrants give up higher paying jobs in the city to live in high-amenity areas. Despite the drop-off in the past 2 years, this trend is likely to continue, shaping the course of rural economies in the coming years.

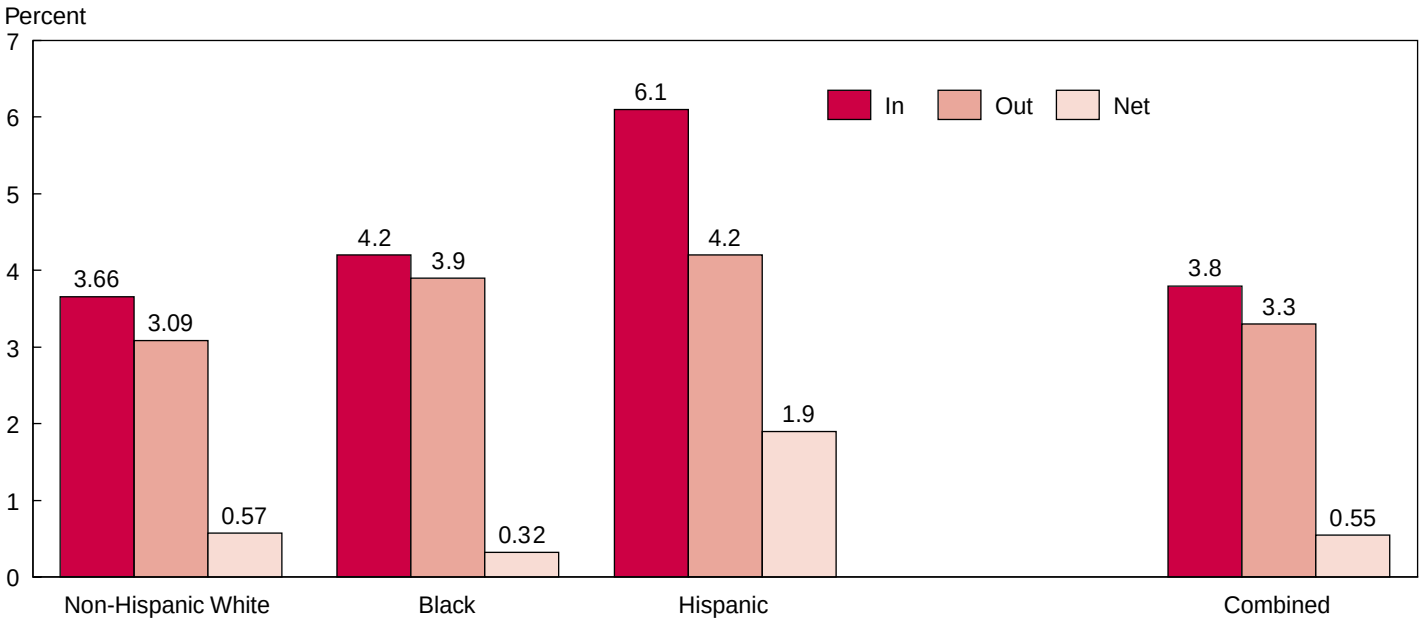
Nonmetro Minorities Moving Mostly to High-Minority Areas

The presence of minorities in nonmetro areas is increasing incrementally due to positive rates of net migration (fig. 4). The data used here do not allow us to show migration origins and destinations at the county level, which differ considerably by race and ethnicity. Current migration continues to reinforce high minority nonmetro populations, in the southern Coastal Plains for Blacks and the Rio Grande Valley and other southwestern locations for Hispanics (see “Minority Counties are Geographically Clustered,” RCaT, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 14).

However, minority presence in other regions is increasing. Seventy percent of Blacks moving from metro to nonmetro areas in 1997-99 moved to the nonmetro South, compared with 85 percent just 2 years earlier, indicating some deconcentration for Blacks into other nonmetro regions. According to the Current Population Survey estimates during the last 2 years, as many Blacks moved from the metro South to the nonmetro South as in the opposite direction. If continued, this pattern would shift a historic trend, because for decades, Blacks, on balance, moved from the countryside to the South’s urban centers.

Almost a third of the 6.1-percent inmigration among nonmetro Hispanics represents immigration from abroad. The outmigration stream does not include emigration to other countries, which the Current Population Survey does not record. Net migration among Hispanics, and to a lesser degree among non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks, is therefore somewhat overstated. Without the contribution of immigrants, nonmetro net migration

Figure 4
Average annual migration rates to nonmetro areas, by race and ethnicity, 1997-99
Higher net migration rates for nonmetro Hispanics were mostly due to higher inmigration



Source: Calculated by ERS using March 1998 and 1999 Current Population Surveys.

gains among Hispanics would still be positive, but closer in magnitude to those of Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites.

Net Migration Gains Higher Among Low-Wage Workers Despite Lower Mobility

Net migration among low-wage workers (defined here as persons ages 25-64 earning full-time equivalent wages at or below the poverty line for a family of four) was close to 1 percent per year during 1997-99. It decreased steadily as income increased, approaching 0.25 percent for workers earning 300 percent or more above the poverty line (fig. 5). Nonmetro Hispanics earn less, on average, than Whites, so the strong correlation between low wages and high net migration during 1997-99 corresponds with minority migration patterns. However, the pattern held for White workers as well.

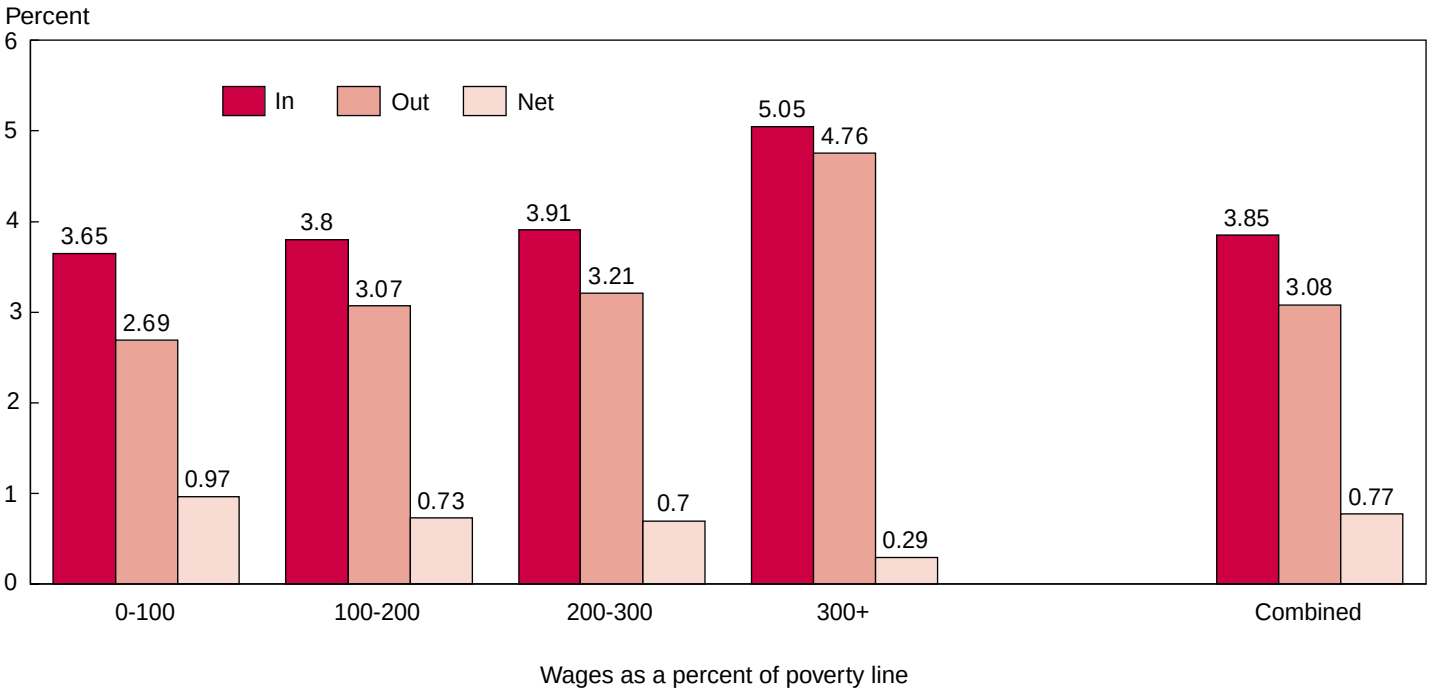
Migration is an important means of adjustment when economic restructuring, such as the loss of manufacturing jobs, or changing government policy, such as welfare reform, shift supply and demand in local labor markets. However, it is difficult to pinpoint why nonmetro areas have recently attracted low-wage workers disproportionately. At the very least, the higher migration suggests that competition for low-wage work in nonmetro areas did not increase rapidly during the mid-1990's, as some had predicted could happen with declining welfare caseloads. Competition is likely much higher in metro areas, where immigration from abroad has been higher.

Higher inmigration among low-wage workers also indicates that booming metro job markets, driven by growth in high-tech industries, are friendlier to migrants with education and experience. In addition, income often enhances a person's ability to migrate, so it is not surprising that, combined, in- and outmigration flows to and from nonmetro areas were much higher for workers in the highest income group. More high-wage workers had the resources to respond to opportunities and preferences in both nonmetro and metro locations. Even though nonmetro growth was small for this group as a whole, the process served to draw income out of some nonmetro areas and add it to others. *[John B. Cromartie, 202-694-5421, jbc@ers.usda.gov]*

Figure 5

Average annual migration rates to nonmetro areas, by wage level, 1997-99

Net migration rates were higher for low-wage workers despite lower overall mobility



Source: Calculated by ERS using March 1998 and 1999 Current Population Surveys.